

Final Report of the Neighborhood Review Committee

Part Two

April 27, 2010

In early March, the Neighborhood Review Committee came out with Part One of our final report. With deadlines looming for the Office of Campus Life to arrange spring room draw for next year, that report made a number of recommendations that we believed could be integrated into the housing selection process. Of those recommendations, the proposals for a strengthened Baxter Fellows program, gender-neutral housing, quiet housing, changes to Neighborhood affiliations, and the removal of penalties for changing Neighborhoods have all been approved. The Office of Campus Life is now working with the Neighborhood Governance Boards (NGBs) and All-Campus Entertainment (ACE), and consulting with College Council, to outline the most effective structures for Neighborhood governance and for social programming on campus. We're pleased that this process is moving forward and believe that the current level of communication and collaboration will produce stronger ties between the NGBs and students in the Neighborhoods and among the NGBs themselves.

The purpose of this report is to provide the campus with our committee's thoughts and suggestions about residential life that either could not be incorporated in this year's room draw or were at a scale that require further exploration by the College.

The Future of the Neighborhoods

As we noted in our first, interim report of October 2009, the NRC was assembled over a year ago with the charge of reviewing the Neighborhood system because of vocal dissatisfaction by students and the financial crisis of 2008-09, which required an accelerated program review as the College evaluated budgetary priorities. Student surveys confirmed the dissatisfaction with the Neighborhood system, although they also added nuance to the most vocal complaints: some student dissatisfaction could be attributed to factors other than the Neighborhood system and a substantial proportion of students believed the overall goals of the Neighborhood system were worthy. Indeed, during the public forums of the fall, the NRC did not hear as much public criticism about the Neighborhood system as some of us imagined we would hear.

The comparative lack of criticism this academic year does not necessarily mean that the dissatisfaction had gone away or that many students were suddenly pleased with the Neighborhood system as a whole or with their individual Neighborhood. But it does suggest that what had been identified as dissatisfaction with the Neighborhoods was a complicated phenomenon. We tried to tease apart the different factors that lay at the root of student unhappiness about upper-class residential life. And we believe we heard clearly from students that, while they wanted to see more flexibility and choice in housing, a majority did not want the College to give up on the goals of the Neighborhood system – goals that encouraged diverse groups of students to live meaningfully together and to create a greater variety of social events for students on campus. Our

recommendations aimed to establish a delicate balance between providing more individual choice and supporting what we hope will be a vibrant, inclusive residential community of students.

That said, our committee had lingering questions about two features of the Neighborhood system, both of which were discussed at great length when the Neighborhoods were first established and received a fair amount of attention among students in our subsequent discussions. First, we have asked ourselves, as have many students, how necessary it is to break a relatively small campus up into four smaller conglomerates. Indeed, students seem often to act in opposition to this impulse, seeking to come together as a student body. For instance, one of the most important features of the campus, which the CUL could not have anticipated in 2005, is the presence of the Paresky Center that acts as a centralizing force on campus, pulling students in at all hours of the day and night. Paresky has had a profound effect on student dining, the NRC discovered, offering four popular dining options. Students have also shown a desire for more ways to draw the entire student body together, speaking often about their desire to have more all-campus events, such as concerts.

At the same time, we believe that as the Neighborhoods have evolved, they have begun to fill an important niche in the social lives of students by providing programming at a smaller level. We thus recognize that the Neighborhoods have achieved success in this area, and we are struck, in the discussion that has ensued since Part One of our report, by the investment that the NGBs have in clarifying their roles and focusing on how they can strengthen their Neighborhood programming.

Are these competing forces between centralized and decentralized programming a problem? Not necessarily, and one could argue that they are healthy signs of a robust student community. Problems would arise, however, if centralized programming undermines the quality of Neighborhood programming or vice-versa. We would hope that the College remains aware that a comfortable balance between these two forces may require additional institutional attention in the future.

Second, we identified a cluster of issues having to do with the physical layout and infrastructure of upper-class residential life at the College. For instance, students often noted the unequal distribution in the types of housing offered within the four Neighborhoods. Also, the relatively arbitrary geographic boundaries of the Neighborhoods are, at the very least, *perceived* as problematic by many students. This was a point of discussion and debate when the Neighborhoods were established, and it is widely acknowledged that some Neighborhoods have greater geographic coherence than others. The far-flung houses and dorms of Wood stand in contrast to the proximity of the buildings in Currier Neighborhood. The Neighborhoods also have distinct differences in the quality of their programmable space: Dodd is blessed with its living room and Currier with its ballroom, and neither Wood nor Spencer has an equivalent. We are not sure how much the geographic delineation of the Neighborhoods, and the quality of their programmable space, have made a difference in Neighborhood programming, but

certainly some students have questioned the coherence of the system as a whole with such evident differences.

Communal spaces within houses are also an important aspect of residential life, but they are one of the few areas in which to expand residential capacity. While recognizing that Williams will face challenges as class sizes increase, we believe that, because encouraging students to interact with one another is a central theme in our vision of Williams housing, common spaces should be preserved to the best of the College's ability after housing needs are met. The larger common spaces, in houses such as Brooks and Dodd, are essential for Neighborhood social programming and are important spaces for students to congregate. If possible, hall and suite common rooms ought to be preserved as well; it is in these spaces that neighbors and hall-mates interact with each other, and they greatly enhance the communal feel of dormitory buildings. However, we must also recognize that there are numerous factors that will play a role in how these spaces are ultimately used.

For some students, problems of geography and uneven quality of physical spaces are substantial impediments to the success of the system. Others are less troubled by them. We do not have easy answers to these questions, but we do believe that the long-term success of the Neighborhoods will require the College to think about them in the context of future capital improvements to College housing, and as the financial situation improves, we hope that long-range planning can address the physical infrastructure of our residential life system.

Sophomore Housing

As part of the Neighborhood review process, the NRC considered other models for residential life as a way to produce substantive discussion about what values the College should encourage. One model, in which sophomores would be housed together, generated much discussion among both the students and committee. During January, the NRC discussed this model at the public forum, sought students' opinions during three days of tabling at Paresky, and surveyed first years and sophomores.

The results of the survey show that a very significant proportion of the Class of 2013 would, if given the chance, choose to live in sophomore housing. Of the 144 first-year students who responded to the survey, when asked "[i]f a system of designated sophomore housing was an option at Williams," 38.2% agreed and 36.1% agreed strongly that they would choose the option. As for the Class of 2012, of the 92 who responded to the survey, when asked if they *would have chosen* to live in sophomore housing this year, 30.8% agreed and 17.6% agreed strongly; however, 31.9% also disagreed strongly. The appendix outlines the responses on two other questions that indicate similar differences of opinion between first-year students and sophomores about the value of sophomore housing. It is striking to note that just over 70% of the first-year respondents believe that the College should offer sophomores the option of living in designated sophomore housing.

Other kinds of student feedback during January suggest a diversity of opinion about housing sophomores together. Some students felt that doing so would help deepen friendships forged during the first-year experience, both among friends who lived in the same entry and those in different entries. Some students also felt that sophomore housing could help to build connections among different groups across the class and therefore help support the goal of fostering meaningful interaction among diverse groups of students. However, others worried that, if housed all together, sophomores would miss the opportunity to forge friendships with and gain the perspectives of older students. Indeed, we wonder (although we don't know for sure) whether the fact that fewer sophomores embrace the idea than first-year students reflects that concern.

The committee recognizes that there is a need at Williams, as is also the case at other schools, to give greater thought to the experience of sophomores. But as was the case with the students we heard from, our committee had a variety of perspectives on the value of sophomore housing. Some members of the committee believed that it could be a very powerful mechanism to support students in what can be a difficult transitional year; to encourage class unity while also fostering friendships and connections among different groups of students; and to help the College develop programming specifically for sophomores. Others shared the concerns of those students who worried that sophomore housing could cut sophomores off from friendships with juniors and seniors and that it might not serve well those students who reach the end of their first year with ambivalent feelings about their entry experience.

A substantial sticking point in the committee's discussion revolved around the matter of offering *optional* sophomore housing. On the one hand, the data we do have – our survey, the tabling, and CC's discussion – strongly indicates that students prefer that sophomore housing be optional rather than mandatory, if the College were to have designated sophomore housing. Some members of the committee believed that, given the strong support for this option among the first-year class, such a system would clearly fill a need and should therefore be considered seriously. Other NRC members wondered how an optional sophomore housing program could clearly articulate institutional goals. Finally, some committee members worried that sophomore housing, whether optional or required, would complicate the College's residential life further, since we already have two distinct systems – one for first-years and another for upper-class students.

In considering the question of sophomore housing, the committee's discussion did not advance far enough for us to consider whether, if the College did institute optional or required sophomore housing, it should be integrated into the current Neighborhood system or whether the College should consider a different model. Clearly, this is a very big question and would require a great deal of thought, if the College decided to institute sophomore housing.

The committee concluded that the sophomore housing option is worthy of further study. We recommend that the College investigate the sophomore residential experience in conjunction with a review of the first-year entry system and that any future sophomore

housing system be carefully articulated with first-year housing. In a future review of the entry system, we would like to see the College emphasize the same values of diversity, community building, and a robust social life that have guided our review of upper-class housing.

Baxter Fellows Program

The Baxter Fellows program began as the House Coordinator program in 2002 and has gone through a number of changes in the intervening years. Throughout the various iterations of the program, the Fellows have been conceived of as student leaders, whose role is to foster a sense of community in their houses, to coordinate with the broader Neighborhood government, and to communicate with the Office of Campus Life. The Baxter Fellows are clearly an important resource in the effort to create a cohesive, friendly, and fulfilling residential environment, but they have also been a topic of concern. At forums and in surveys, students suggested that the Baxter Fellows role had often been reduced to organizing snacks for the house and that they played too small a part in creating any real sense of community. Students also considered the jobs of the Baxter Fellows to be ill-defined and worried that some Fellows were attracted to the paid position for the wrong reasons.

As outlined in Part One of our final report, the Neighborhood Review Committee recommends a significant reconceptualization of the role of Baxter Fellows, focusing primarily on two areas: conflict resolution and community building within the house.

Students value the freedom from oversight that they enjoy in their residences, and they have clearly voiced their resistance to a traditional residential advisor system. Yet most members of the community also recognize the need to establish mutually agreed-upon norms of behavior in residences and, moreover, accept that conflicts are bound to occur in even the best organized residential system. The committee would like to see the Baxter Fellows take on a larger role in leading discussions of communal norms within their houses, opening lines of communication, and hopefully fostering a mutually respectful environment. We believe that Baxter Fellows should be better trained in conflict resolution and better prepared to handle, with respect and fairness, issues arising from disparate lifestyles and differing expectations for dorm life. Ultimately, we believe that the Baxter Fellows should be the first resource for low-level conflict resolution within dorms.

Baxter Fellows have traditionally been in charge of organizing some house-level social events, but events planning responsibilities running from the house, to the Neighborhood, to the all-campus level have not always been clearly delineated. In our first report, the committee proposed that Baxter Fellows should play a role in re-organized Neighborhood Governance Boards, facilitating communication between the three levels of social planning and reducing redundant events; we envisioned Baxter Fellows making up much of the body of reorganized NGBs, coordinating activities from the local to the Neighborhood level while the elected members of the boards would coordinate

Neighborhood and all-campus events. By increasing Fellows' responsibilities for Neighborhood governance we hoped to increase the role and visibility of the Fellows, answering student concerns about under-utilization of the program.

Current conversations among the Neighborhood Governance Boards have now produced a common vision for the NGBs that departs from our recommendations, including a Baxter Fellows program structured differently from what we had proposed. But even though this process is leading the NGBs in a different direction, we believe the process has been profoundly valuable in forging a shared sense of purpose among the boards. Whatever the precise organization is of the NGBs and whatever the Baxter Fellows' relationship to the boards, we hope that a structure will be created that facilitates effective communication between Baxter Fellows and NGBs.

Changing the role of the Baxter Fellows and making them into more robust, legitimate, and important players in residential life will not happen overnight. The committee urges the College to prioritize changes that will help the Fellows begin house-level conversations about expectations and norms and that will prepare them for an expanded role in conflict resolution. We would like to see the Fellows benefit from Williams students' pride in their relative autonomy within the dorms. The Fellows should become proof of students' capacities for self-governance, even while they facilitate communication between students and the Office of Campus Life. To fill this role, the Fellows need their responsibilities to be better defined and better publicized, and they need support and training from the College.

Faculty- Student Interaction

In surveying students about the Neighborhood system, the committee found that students were not concerned about the quantity or quality of student interactions with faculty members in their residential life, although some groups of students valued those interactions more than others. We took this to mean that, while Williams students value close relationships with their teachers, these relationships are less central to students than other residential concerns.

The Neighborhood structure has provided a means for creating new opportunities for faculty-student interaction. As the system currently stands, there is a single faculty advisor for each Neighborhood. This is a recent development, and we believe that the shift from multiple faculty advisors to a single faculty member advising each Neighborhood has created clearer lines of communication. In addition, each member of the faculty is formally affiliated with a Neighborhood. Because it has been difficult, at times, to organize events that draw strong attendance from both faculty and students, some members of the committee held that expanding the pool of potential faculty invitees by ending the formal (and often merely nominal) relationships between faculty members and Neighborhoods may make it easier to draw faculty to Neighborhood functions.

However, other committee members saw value in the stronger ties that a formal affiliation can bring. Faculty advisors from individual Neighborhoods have argued that being able to focus invitations on a subset of the faculty and have those faculty members actively involved in a Neighborhood has led to a growth in participation over time. As a result of our committee's multiple perspectives on this question, we did not see fit to make an official recommendation for changing faculty affiliations, although we believe it is a question that should be examined next year, perhaps specifically by the Committee on Undergraduate Life.

Going forward: Evaluating Residential Life at Williams

In now wrapping up our work, the NRC hopes that the College will consider appropriate mechanisms to evaluate residential life at Williams. One good place to start would be with the changes that have come out of our recommendations: the strengthening of the Baxter Fellows program; the instituting of a "quiet house"; gender neutral housing; the removal of Neighborhood affiliations for the Class of 2014; and the end of penalties for students seeking to switch Neighborhoods. We believe it will be important for the College to charge a group – either one already charged with exploring the issues outlined above, or perhaps a different one – with the responsibility of developing the measures by which these changes should be evaluated and to analyze and report the outcomes to the community. Some of this analysis – for instance, of quiet housing – should happen as early as the middle of the next academic year. But this work should just be the start of what would be planned, periodic assessments of residential life that explore whether our structures both express institutional values and meet student needs. This will always be a delicate balance but a critically important one to maintain.

We're certainly aware that, having been asked to review the Neighborhood system, we've concluded our task by recommending *further* analysis – of co-op housing (one of our recommendations in Part One of our final report), sophomore housing, and faculty affiliations in the Neighborhoods – and a plan to periodically assess residential life in the future. But as we learned in our year-long project, the questions surrounding residential life are complex and often do not lend themselves to easy answers. Putting in place a process to evaluate how the College is doing when it comes to students' residential experiences will, we believe, help create structures that can evolve as needed to meet the changing needs of our students as individuals and as a community.

Neighborhood Review Committee Members, Winter Study/Spring Semester 2010

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 Jonathan Carroll, '11
 Aaron Gordon, Campus Life
 Christina Liu, '10
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APPENDIX
Class of 2013

Please evaluate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:					
	Disagree Strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree Strongly	Response Count
The College should create a designated area of sophomore housing that includes the entire class	10.4% (15)	23.6% (34)	38.2% (55)	27.8% (40)	144
The College should offer rising sophomores an <u>option</u> to choose between living in sophomore-designated housing OR housing mixed with juniors and seniors	9.0% (13)	19.4% (28)	57.6% (83)	13.9% (20)	144
If a system of designated sophomore housing was an option at Williams, I would choose, or I would have chosen, to opt in as a rising sophomore	8.3% (12)	17.4% (25)	38.2% (55)	36.1% (52)	144
	<i>answered question</i>				144
	<i>skipped question</i>				4

Class of 2012

Please evaluate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:					
	Disagree Strongly	Disagree	Agree	Agree Strongly	Response Count
The College should create a designated area of sophomore housing that includes the entire class	43.5% (40)	22.8% (21)	28.3% (26)	5.4% (5)	92
The College should offer rising sophomores an <u>option</u> to choose between living in sophomore-designated housing OR housing mixed with juniors and seniors	26.1% (24)	31.5% (29)	31.5% (29)	10.9% (10)	92
If a system of designated sophomore housing was an option at Williams, I would choose, or I would have chosen, to opt in as a rising sophomore	31.9% (29)	19.8% (18)	30.8% (28)	17.6% (16)	91
	<i>answered question</i>				92
	<i>skipped question</i>				1